

From VOA Learning English, welcome to As It Is.

I'm Steve Ember.

Today on our program, we tell about a study that shows vitamins and mineral supplements can safely slow the progress of the virus that causes the disease AIDS.

The study found that when provided early to patients, a simple multivitamin combined with selenium can slow the progress of HIV, the human immunodeficiency virus. But one of the world's top AIDS researchers is disputing the findings. We'll hear from him later.

But first, we have a report from the World Health Organization. WHO officials now say children can and should be tested and treated for HIV, even if they are severely malnourished.

New Treatment Rules Suggested for Malnourished Children

The WHO says affected children can now be treated at home with special foods and antibiotic drugs, instead of being taken to a hospital for treatment.

WHO officials are defining severe acute malnutrition as very low weight for height, and severe wasting. They say almost 20 million children under the age of five suffer from the condition. Most of these boys and girls are said to live in Africa and Southeast Asia.

The WHO says malnutrition is one reason for more than a third of all deaths of children under the age of five.

Zita Weise Prinzo helped to write the new report. She works in the WHO's Department of Nutrition for Health and Development.

She says the WHO is now advising that not all severely acutely malnourished children go to a hospital. She says children already identified with the condition can be treated at home if they are hungry and have no other medical problem. She notes that a hospitalized child could develop other infections. And, being at home avoids hospital costs and lets a caretaker stay with the child.

Ms. Prinzo says home care does not mean doctors will not see the child. Doctors will work closely with families to help them give the child special foods and antibiotics, and examine the child from time to time.

The WHO also says children with severe acute malnutrition should be tested -- and, if necessary, treated -- for HIV, the cause of AIDS.

Ms. Prinzo says that such testing was not advised in the past. That was because there was not enough knowledge about treating severe acute malnutrition, or even children who have HIV, with the available drugs.

The WHO report sets measures for identifying children at risk of severe acute malnutrition before they develop serious health problems. These include use of vitamin A supplements in treatment and detailed suggestions for treating babies under the age of six months.

Ms. Prinzo says if the new guidelines are enforced at the country level, the chance of survival for children with severe acute malnutrition will be greatly improved. However, she said many developing countries do not have the money or workers to carry out the recommendations.

You're listening to As It Is from VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember.

Study Claims Vitamins, Minerals Slow Progress of HIV

Patients with HIV often develop shortages of vitamins in the body. Researchers examined whether giving these patients a multivitamin with a mineral supplement helps to improve the body's natural defenses in fighting disease.

For 30 years, AIDS has been a major health problem in some African countries south of the Sahara Desert. In Botswana, one of every four adults is infected with HIV. Yet the country also has aggressive AIDS prevention campaigns. That is why Professor Marianna Baum decided to carry out her research on HIV and vitamins there.

"Botswana has been one of the hardest-hit countries with the HIV virus."

Professor Baum studied almost 900 newly infected adults in Botswana who had not yet been given anti-AIDS drugs that target HIV. The adults were divided into groups. Each group got different combinations of vitamins B, C and E, the mineral selenium, or a harmless substance -- a placebo.

Most patients with HIV do not have enough of these vitamins. The vitamins help to strengthen the body's immune system. Professor Baum says she thought the multivitamins by themselves or selenium by itself would help strengthen the immune system. She was wrong.

"We were surprised to find that only the combination was effective."

Studies show that when people with HIV begin taking anti-retroviral drugs shortly after infection, they can stay healthy and are less likely to pass the virus to their sexual partners. But many patients do not have enough money to pay for treatment.

Professor Baum says the vitamin and mineral therapy combination should help people in low-income countries better control the virus.

"A simple multivitamin supplementation with selenium provided early in HIV disease can actually slow the HIV disease progression, and it is safe. It is low-cost and it should be provided very early in HIV infection."

She says the vitamin therapy should not replace anti-retroviral drugs, but it can help people who cannot get those medicines.

American Anthony Fauci is a world famous expert on AIDS. He disagrees with the findings of the study.

"I haven't read the paper, but having taken care of HIV-infected individuals for three decades, I would doubt that vitamins are going to have a major effect on suppressing the virus."

Dr. Fauci says vitamin and mineral supplements might make a patient generally healthier. But he says only anti-retroviral drugs have been proven to control HIV.

Professor Baum's study was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

And that's As It Is for today. Tell us what you want to hear about on our show. We want to cover the issues and ideas that matter in your world, As It Is. Let us know. Go on our website, learningenglish.voanews.com, and click on "Contact Us." I'm Steve Ember. Thanks for joining us.